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Advisers pressuring president to forget about SALT II rules

By Bill Gertz
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Senior U.S. advisers are recommending that President Reagan pursue strategic weapons programs without regard to compliance with the unratified SALT II treaty limitations, administration sources said yesterday.

President Reagan will decide by the beginning of next week whether

the United States will comply with nuclear weapons limits set by the treaty, the sources said.

All the options presently being formulated by middle-level officials for a decision by the president and his Cabinet-level advisers call for some degree of SALT II violations, according to the sources. They caution, however, that the debate is continuing and the final decision rests with the president himself.

The debate, which Capitol Hill conservatives regard as a "fight for the heart and soul" of the Reagan administration, is expected to reach its peak Tuesday when the presidential decision is made public.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said yesterday that the president "is in the process of reviewing" U.S. options regarding

SALT II compliance.

He said no decision has been made because the administration has been busy preparing for the second round of U.S.-Soviet arms control talks, which starts today in Geneva.

Under the terms of an amendment to the fiscal 1985 Defense Authorization bill, the president has until June 1 to report to Congress on U.S. policy toward SALT II compliance.

But Mr. Speakes said the report to Congress might not include Mr. Reagan's decision on the issue.

"Whether or not he tells them [Congress] what we're going to do when SALT II expires and whether he tells them he is reviewing a number of options and outlines those options remains to be seen," Mr. Speakes said.

The options under consideration

lead the United States to violate the SALT agreement in response to Soviet violations, government sources said.

"Everyone agrees that we can't be in a position of not responding to Soviet violations," said one official familiar with the arms control issues.

However, the sources cautioned that these options have been presented by "middle-level" officials, and none of the "principals" who will participate in a White House National Security Council meeting next week have yet weighed in with their recommendations.

Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger were among those principals who have not yet given their views to President Reagan for his decision. The Joint Chiefs of Staff also have not presented their position, an official said.

One official said that almost all of the options being discussed "one way or the other would involve technical violations" of the Salt II agreement.

The amendment requires the president to report on four SALT-related topics. He must notify Congress of the effect of the U.S. Alaska sea trials on current "no undercut" policy on strategic arms.

The administration will face its first challenge to the SALT II limits this August when the U.S.S. Alaska begins sea trials. By launching the Alaska, the U.S. will go over the 1,200 threshold for submarine-launched ballistic missiles set by SALT II.

The president's report also must assess the Soviet political, military and negotiating responses to a decision to abandon the SALT II restraints and must review Soviet activities with respect to arms control agreements.

Finally, the report must "make recommendations regarding the future of U.S. strategic offensive arms agreement."

Administration sources said senior arms control advisers are scheduled to meet this Friday to discuss the decision on SALT.

The senior advisers, Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle, Assistant Secretary of State Richard

Burt, State Department Politico-Military Affairs Director John Chain, National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane and Chief Arms Control Adviser Paul Nitze, will pre-

pare policy recommendations for the National Security Council.

The final decision on whether the U.S. will comply with the restraints of the 1979 unratified treaty is expected following a National Security Council meeting on Monday.

On Capitol Hill, treaty compliance proponents and opponents have prepared amendments on the SALT issue intended for this year's Defense Department authorization bill.

Proponents, lead by Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt. and Dale Bumpers, D-Ark., favor a one-year extension of the SALT provisions, which they hope to tack on to the Defense bill.

SALT critics have prepared a counter-amendment that would prohibit the Pentagon from using any funds to dismantle weapons systems in order to comply with the SALT treaty.

That amendment, co-sponsored by Steve Symms, R-Idaho, and Ernest Hollings, D-S.C., is expected to be the subject of heated Senate debate when it is brought before Congress late next week.

In a "Dear Colleague" letter sent out last week the two senators urged Congress to "save the Poseidons." Under a SALT compliance decision, one U.S. option would be to deactivate 10 Poseidon nuclear missile submarines that would diminish the number of U.S. strategic warheads by 1,600.

A recent classified CIA study of SALT compliance found that dismantling the Poseidons would give the Soviet Union a significant lead in the number of nuclear warheads in its arsenal, a key indicator of strategic nuclear strength and an essential element of balance in the deterrent strategy.

Sen. Hollings' support for the amendment is regarded as a key indicator of bi-partisan support for abandoning the SALT II limits. He also voted against the SALT I treaty in 1972.

Sen. Hollings told the Senate last week that SALT was never ratified because "it was not in the security interests of the United States."

"Simply stated, we have a treaty violator on our hands," Mr. Hollings said of Soviet SALT violations, 11 of which have been documented by the administration. "It is not a close call; it is a categorical call made by a bipartisan group," he said referring to the Presidential General Advisory Committee on Arms Control report on Soviet violations.

"If the president agrees to continue abiding by SALT II, conservatives in the Senate will accuse the administration of appeasing the Soviets, in the same way Scoop Jackson accused the Carter administration of appeasement in 1979," one Senate aide said. The late Senator Henry M. Jackson was a key Democratic opponent of SALT II who helped defeat Carter administration efforts to have the Senate ratify the treaty.

"The fight [over SALT II compliance] is a battle for the heart and soul of the second Reagan term," the aide said.

SALT critics point to President Reagan's statements opposing the treaty. Last May 10 in Europe, the president called the agreement "rather one-sided" and said as a result "there's no need for us to continue" the treaty.

Walter Andrews and Mary Belcher contributed to this report.